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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Body / Landscape

by

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05 / 07 / 2004

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction

The Influences: Sung Landscape Painting and Abstract Expressionism

2. My Landscape Painting

- a. The Relationships with Sung Landscape Painting and Abstract Expressionism
- b. Reaching Out to the External World

3. My Figure Painting

- a. The Beginning, Evolution and the Relationships between My Landscape and Abstract Expressionism
- b. Techniques and Colors
- c. Influence of Impressionism
- d. Comparison with Bay Area Figurative Artists
- e. A New Direction

4. Comparison with Contemporary Artists

5. Future Direction

INTRODUCTION

The influences Sung landscape painting and abstract expressionism

Traditional Chinese painting shows serious attention to thorough observation, a firm and full understanding of reality and its medium. In other words, no matter what way the painter wants to express himself/herself, the very basic prerequisite is that he/she handle the traditional aspects of reality very well. An early Sung (A.D. 960-1279) master, Kuo Hsi, in his essay on landscape-painting, pointed out the secret rules of painting:

Whatever motif the painter represents, be it large or small, complicated or simple, he should do it by concentrating on its essential nature. If something of the essential is lacking, the spirit is not focused. The spirit must be fused with the work; if not so, the essentials will not be clear. He must be severe and serious in his work in order to give it dignity. If he is not severe his thoughts will not be profound. He must be persevering (diligent) in order to make it complete; otherwise the picture will not be properly finished (Siren, 1973, p. 222).

The preparation before starting a painting is considered vital. One has to settle one's mind. The mind should be in tranquility and emptiness, neither in excitement nor anxiety. In this manner, it is possible for the artist to become one with the universe. Only when the mind is clear and free of outward distraction can one see the essence of matter, the inner reality of things, and capture its spirit by brush. With the full strength of creative impetus, one is ready to paint. During the process of painting, the mind should keep settled, and the energy must flow easily without the interference of thought. Each moment builds up the meanings of the painting. The action of painting is just as important as the final object- the painting itself. Like abstract expressionism, the meaning of painting is revealed during the performance. All the approaches to a painting are to achieve one goal, to become one with the universe.

Chinese masters treat each brushstroke severely and carefully. Even with a sketchy looking painting, like Kuo Hsi's Early Spring [fig. 1], or a very abstract painting, like an

early Ch'ing (A.D. 1644-1912) painter, Tao-chi's Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Dots [fig. 2], the painter's attitude is serious. A person without traditional training or one who is light-hearted while executing a painting will not be able to achieve the same spiritual level.

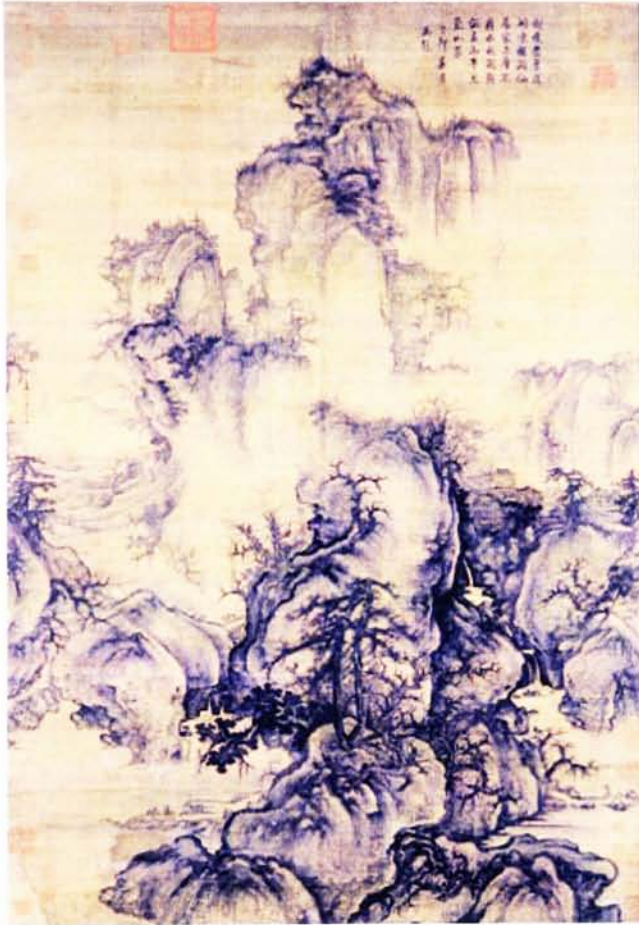


Fig. 1. Kuo Hsi (act. ca. 1060-75). *Early Spring*. Dated 1072. Hanging scroll. Ink and slight color on silk. 158.3 cm. x 108.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.



Fig. 2. Tao-chi (1642-1708). *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Dots*. Dated 1685.
Section of a handscroll. Ink on paper. Height 25.6 cm. Soochow Museum.

In Chinese art, calligraphy and painting are both sides of the same thing. A master of calligraphy must be a master of painting. The techniques, approaches and philosophy are closely related. The abstract and organic forms of the Chinese characters in calligraphy can also be seen in the abstract and organic expressions in painting.

Chinese painters like to use simplified and abstract forms to suggest objects and use voids to suggest space. These psychological elements, derived from the nature of Chinese philosophy and also part of reality, are very essential in Chinese painting. In the section of a handscroll, *Mountain Village, Clearing After Rain* [fig. 3], of the Zen Buddhist monk Yü-chien in Southern Sung period (A.D. 1127-1279), we can see the simplification and elimination of solid forms, and very spontaneous and intuitive brushwork resulting in a nearly pure abstraction. The essence of landscape is captured by only a few brushstrokes, which contain various tones and values. So also are the bridge and hikers who are walking in the mountain. Generally there are no complete shapes of any sort. They are dissolved into a misty environment and atmosphere. "The role of voids and solids in establishing a strongly contrasting figure-ground relationship is critical to the assertiveness of compositional design in a Chinese painting" (Silbergeld, 1997, p. 49).



Fig. 3. Yü-chien (mid-thirteenth century). *Mountain Village, Clearing After Rain*. Handscroll, section, mounted as a hanging scroll. Ink on paper. 30.3 cm. x 83.3 cm. Idemitsu Art Museum, Tokyo.

In contrast, most western artists traditionally do not view or use the surface itself as a significant part of the creation of illusion. Although the abstract expressionists maintain similar ideas, some of them started to use and view raw canvas or paper as an important element of the illusion, like Joan Mitchell. She utilized quite a bit of emptiness in some of her paintings. The brushstrokes are spontaneously moving across the canvas. The forms dissolve and come out of the empty space without any reference to recognizable forms, which is different than Chinese painting. No matter how abstract the painting is, like Tao-chi's *Ten Thousand Ugly Ink Dots*, it still has some reference to the external world. Although the mark making stands on its own without intending to form shapes of any sort, the viewer can still sense leaves, trees, etc. in the abstraction. Maybe because of the unrecognizable forms and pure colors or maybe because of the influence of western culture and philosophy, I think Joan Mitchell used the empty space in a more material way as opposed to the psychological implication the voids bring in Chinese painting.

Most of Sung landscape paintings, especially Northern Sung (A.D. 960-1127), are a matter of compositional design and dynamics instead of realistic depiction. Many of them have multiple perspectives and inconsistent ground planes rather than a fixed point of view. "...the artist has introduced varying points of view in order to create a panoramic vision of nature." So the viewer will move the head up and down, from left to right, "to experience nature as diverse and unlimited" (Silbergeld, 1997, p. 37).

An example of Kuo Hsi's mature work, *Early Spring*, shows his remarkable skill, imaginative power, and thorough penetration of nature. The rocks are rounded, and the atmosphere blocks some of the solids. Both of these characteristics, along with the wash technique, make it softer and spatially ambiguous. However, the landscape is carefully depicted without losing expressiveness. Here the design of the twisting and slanting rocks from the bottom to the top of the picture form a very dynamic, winding movement, which dominates the main part of the picture, and the shapes of the trees harmonize with the movement. He also effectively used multiple viewing positions to show a comprehensive perception of landscape.

Kuo Hsi's essay also talks about the viewer's mental experience with the place in the painting. A landscape that invites the viewer to dwell in and to ramble is considered a masterpiece (Siren, 1973, p. 221). A good picture should provide the beholder a spiritual experience: evoking the corresponding feelings in the viewer as if one were actually in those places without leaving the house (Siren, 1973, p. 224). The long horizontal handscroll depicting different scenes records time changes in traveling and invites the viewer to be involved in the traveling experience of the artist. Like a Southern Sung artist, Hsia Kuei's *Pure and Remote Views of Streams and Mountains* [fig. 4], the viewer can hardly appreciate the whole handscroll all at once. The viewer is forced to move from right to left and experience different traveling rhythms.

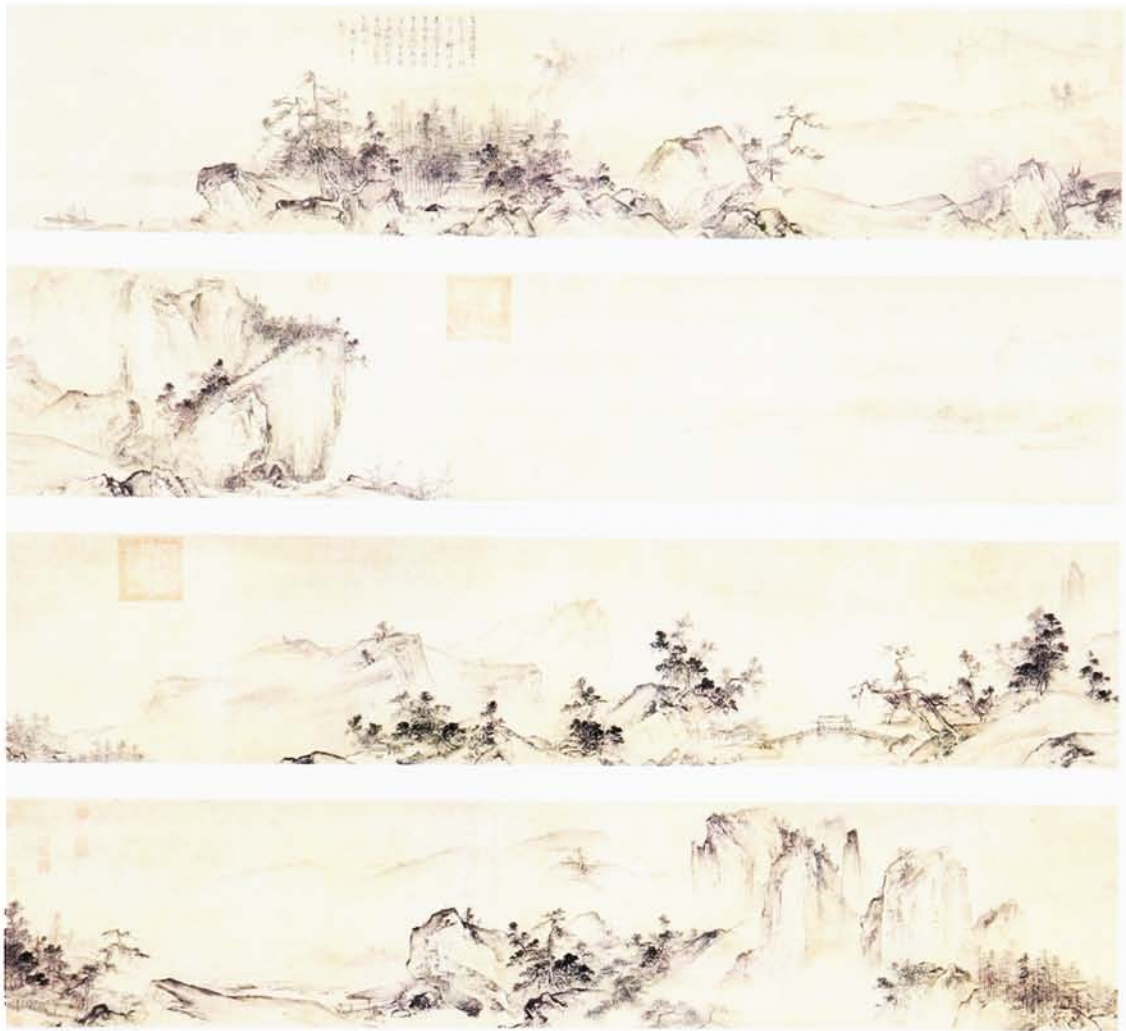


Fig. 4. Hsia Kuei (act. ca. 1190-1225). *Pure and Remote Views of Streams and Mountains*. Handscroll. Ink on paper. 46.5 cm. x 889.1 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.

The process Kuo Hsi talks about best describes the concept in Sung landscape. “When I have stored up the impressions in the heart, then with the eye unconscious of the silk and the hand unconscious of brush and ink, marvellous, mysterious, boundless becomes that picture of mine” (Siren, 1973, p. 224).

On the other hand, the abstract expressionists abandoned all external references. They let the unconscious and subconscious come through naturally by applying paint directly on canvas without thinking intellectually. Unlike the surrealist, these images have no reference to anything in the real world. The marks unfold directly from the artist’s inner

self, revealing the artist's emotion and psychological state. Mostly, the painting is independent of reality and representation, and has a life of its own. The work can be appreciated as an object itself instead of as a picture using traditional illusion. Through the action of painting, one defines and discovers oneself and the surroundings. It is a process of introspection and self-realization. Each layer and brushstroke is a present and immediate psychic experience. The traditional time concept no longer exists. When the viewer looks at an abstract expressionist painting, like Jackson Pollock's *Cathedral*, 1947 [fig. 5] or Willem DeKooning's *Woman I*, 1950-2, he is not looking at a final image. The viewer can imagine the process of creating the work and the experiences and mental forces in each moment. The painting is always freshly in the present.

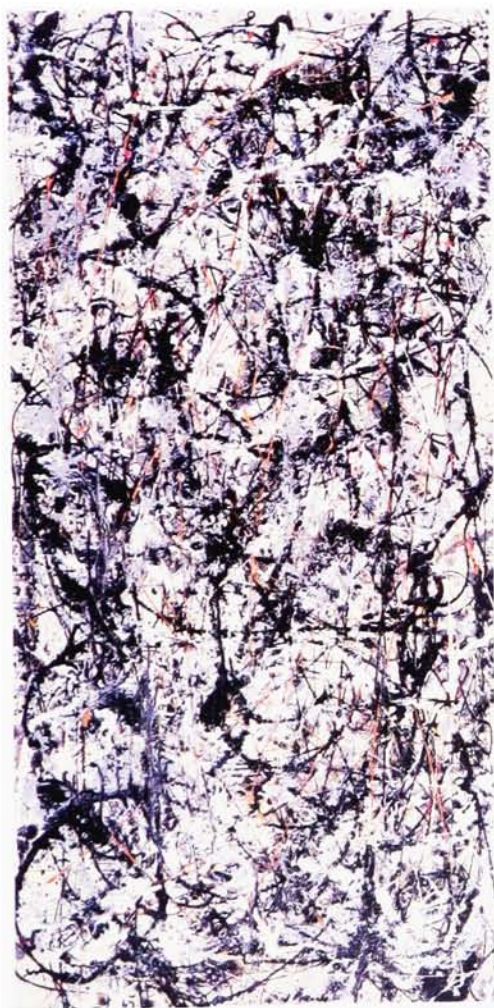


Fig. 5. Jackson Pollock. *Cathedral*, 1947.
Enamel and aluminum paint on canvas.
71 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 35 $\frac{1}{6}$ in. Collection, Dallas
Museum of Art.

“In the dripping and poured canvases Pollock eliminated all symbols and signs; only the gesture itself remained as a mythic metaphor” (Fineberg, 2000, p. 93). The main subject matter for Jackson Pollock is not from the outer world but from the direct expression of self-exploration. His dripping painting contains an almost evenly-spread composition instead of a focus. It dissolves into a chaos made up of fluid and energetic lines and at the same time holds together as a whole and unified structure. Like some Sung landscape paintings, there is no fixed perspective in the overall field as in Renaissance paintings. The viewer is driven to move their eyes around and across the canvas, to follow the energetic forces and closely examine the canvas to find his/her way out of the energetic chaos. The viewer experiences the psychological journey of the artist, the same way the audience gets involved in the artist’s experience with a place in Sung landscape. However, instead of evoking the correspondent feelings toward the external world like Sung landscape, abstract expressionist painting invites the viewer into the inner world of the artist.

Instead of passively looking at a picture and having personal control over a picture, the role of the viewer changes. The audiences bring their own thoughts and feelings to a painting, surrendering themselves to movement and color. They may try to re-enact the act of painting in their minds, and thus are able to comprehend the deeper meaning of the work. “The transparency of the process – the way in which the viewer can so readily reconstruct the act of creation- gives the drip paintings an extraordinary immediacy.” The central emphasis of modernism, the present, is what Pollock’s drip painting brought about (Fineberg, 2000, p. 94).

Unlike Pollock’s free association through the unconscious, de Kooning’s spontaneity was from conscious intuitions, which were built up from years of painting experience and examples of other painters. “... for de Kooning, art must discover its form in the actuality of the artist’s life...” (Rosenberg, 1982, p. 111). He reacted against identity, ideology and refused to imitate or to be classified into any style. What he was seeking was a synthesis. By examining the art of the past, he explored the starting point of artists’ thoughts about art as well as their works and, therefore, was able to find the components that composed them. He reused those elements in his own unique and fresh ways. In metaphorical abstraction, like *Excavation* [fig. 6], he was painting freely and spontaneously and at the same time discovering the meaning in the images that came out of his actions. These two

opposite aspects were achieved in creating a unity by going back and forth between instinct and rationality. “ Without being premeditated, his movements occur under the constant scrutiny of his esthetic conscience” (Rosenberg, 1982, p. 117).

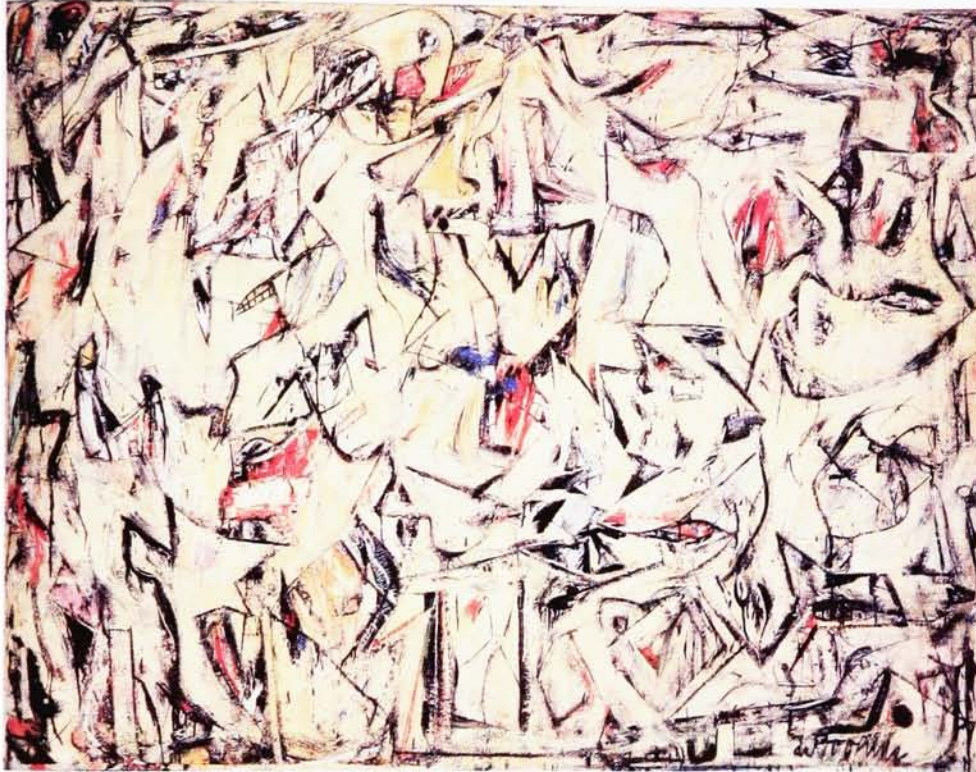


Fig. 6. Willem de Kooning *Excavation*, 1950. Oil on canvas. 6ft 8in x 8ft 4½in.
Collection, Art Institute of Chicago.

Moreover he thinks painting and the artist only function during the action of painting. “...as de Kooning liked to say, the artist functions by ‘getting into the canvas’ and working his way out again...” (Rosenberg, 1982, p. 118).

Through his “Woman” series, he showed changing experiences instead of expressing certain feelings. In *Woman I* [fig. 7], the irreconcilable contradiction and conflict of forces and freely discharged energy in paint, which brought the figure to life, resulted in its monstrousness and spontaneity. The mental battle continued for almost two years. By reworking, he struggled with himself. He reworked the painting every day until he had to leave it in order to continue his career.



Fig. 7. Willem de Kooning
Woman I, 1950-2. Oil on canvas.
6ft 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 4ft 10in. The Museum of
Modern Art, New York. Purchase.

Another abstract expressionist that I find really intriguing in the way he created the tension between polarities aesthetically and psychologically is Hans Hofmann. Hofmann used an extreme intensity of color in two contrasting ways. "...on the one hand, the free, spontaneous gesture, and on the other, the austere linearity of the rectangle" (Friedel & Dickey, 1998, p. 10). The viewer follows his movement of applying colors in his spontaneous gestures, like the works *The Wind* and *Prelude of Spring*. The colors are in a harmonized rhythm. The color creates its own illusion and depth instead of giving way to a traditional three dimensional space. "...Hofmann allows color to act out a drama of its own making; he provides the basic structure and setting, as it were, but then leaves the material free to realize its inner potential" (Friedel & Dickey, 1998, p. 11). In his painting of color rectangles, the perfection, pureness and flatness of those opaque color rectangles define a different sense of reality and spacial relationship. With the material quality, they

look like cutouts from colored paper. The different arrangements of various colors and sizes and their relationship to space and to other colors create a dynamic movement. The interaction between expanding and condensed forces of colors in some of the works strengthens the movement. Although at a still position, they are moving in and out, back and forth in space. It looks like the process of placing and rearranging is still in progress.

Tension between rational thinking and intuitive feeling best describes the creation of his work. He said, "My work is not accidental and is not planned. The first red spot on a white canvas may at once suggest to me the meaning of 'morning redness' and from there on I dream further with my color" (Friedel & Dickey, 1998, p. 89) He also talked about how he viewed the reality of art, "...Pictorial life is not imitated life; it is, on the contrary, a created reality based on the inherent life within every medium of expression. We have only to awaken it" (Friedel & Dickey, 1998, p. 12). Hofmann found the inherent life through the act of painting. He stated:

Let me confess: I hold my mind and my work free from any association foreign to the act of painting. I am thoroughly inspired and agitated by the actions themselves that the development of the painting continuously requires. From the beginning, this puts me in a positive mood, which I must persistently follow until the picture has found realization through paint (Friedel & Dickey, 1998, p. 90).

Like de Kooning and many other artists, Hofmann declined to repeat himself. His desire to invent, to discover and to get inspired drives him to struggle through the difficulties of going beyond where he was and work his way out by following his creative instincts.

MY LANDSCAPE PAINTING

The Relationships with Sung Landscape Painting and Abstract Expressionism

As a cultural background, Chinese painting has an important influence on me and also my art. The traditional idea of the relationship between humans and nature is the central philosophy in Chinese landscape painting, especially Sung landscape painting. The artist did not paint on site. He painted from his memory and an impression of the place. The interpretation of the memory is more personal rather than realistic. Some of the landscape paintings were done after several years had passed since the journey. The artist would actually go to the place by himself in order to grasp its visual reality and its meaning. If he wants to paint a mountain, he will go to a mountain, examine it and experience its spirit. The artist would not paint totally from his imagination without actually being there. The real experience is what makes a painting vivid and full of life. The dialogue between the human being and nature is more essential than the revelation of pure inner self, as was the case in abstract expressionism.

Most of my earlier works are landscape paintings. The *Dark Forest* series [fig. 8 and 9] was started from a general forest image, and they are all painted in the studio, not on site. Before I started to paint, I had a very basic idea of “forest” in mind. The image is not a specific site or scene. I just knew I was going to paint a forest or something like a forest. Similar to Sung landscape painters, I painted from my memory of the forest. While I was proceeding, I focused on applying paint and building texture instead of executing a forest image. From this point, I departed from Sung landscape painting. I manipulated the paint, let the paint tell me what to do. During the process, my emotions and feelings were revealed in the action of painting. However, I did not only focus on the action of painting, like the abstract expressionists did. I still referred to the general forest idea once in a while. So my mind swung between concept and feeling during the process, spontaneously involved in the action but still maintaining the basic structure of the original idea. I struggled with myself through the process to the point where the picture satisfied me in terms of spatial relationships, texture, color and light. Like the abstract expressionists’ emphasis on each mental state in the process, these works are more about internal and

personal feelings, although they are expressed through a representational structure. They are set in a zone between abstraction and representation. The thick paint and rough texture, which was built up by organic gestures, enabled the surface of the painting to materialize. It can stand alone by itself as an object which compares favorably to the abstract expressionists' works in this respect. The audience can appreciate it both as an object and also as pictorial illusion. The work switches back and forth between the material and the spiritual.



Fig. 8. *Dark Forest I*, 2002. Oil on canvas, 30 x 44 in.



Fig. 9. *Dark Forest III*, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 40 in.

In Sung landscape painting, the artists captured the essence of the landscape. In my painting, I revealed subjectively more about how I felt than the landscape. The forms of the trees are blended into the environment and generate an ambiguous atmosphere. The consistent texture, which goes from one form to another, is evenly spread over the whole painting and enhances the dissolution of shape rendering. I see my cultural heritage in this ambiguity; and through conveying the feel of nature in the painting. However, the way I handle the ambiguity is more material-oriented rather than psychological as was the Sung landscape. The original source is transformed into an embodied psychological state. When the viewer sees the *Dark Forest* series, the feeling is of being sucked into the painting, into the illusion in the painting. The viewer senses the sound or the tranquility in the place; and experience being in the place or walking through the place. The psychological journey of the viewer, which is highly emphasized in Chinese landscape painting, is one of the unexpected results.

In the painting, *Two Waterfalls* [fig. 10], my process changed. I did not have a specific subject matter anymore, like forest. I just knew it might be a landscape, but I was not sure. The starting stage is even closer to the process of abstract expressionism. I started with just applying paint and did not know exactly what I was doing and what was going to come out. I surrendered myself to the paint and freed myself in the act of painting. I was waiting for an image to materialize, on the canvas and also in my mind. When I finally saw something, I started to strengthen it and extend from it, but not make it descriptive or realistic. What I was strengthening is the feel of something. In the process of extending and strengthening, I still maintained the spontaneous quality, but just with clearer definitions of subject matter in mind. The ending point of the painting is the same as that of the *Dark Forest* series, where I reached a point that the picture satisfied me. The process of leading me to see “the image” is full of struggle. Especially, when I was working on the left painting of *Two Waterfalls*, I had a very hard time trying to pull the image out. Because of the repeated process of building-up and scraping, the canvas was covered by thick and chunky paint, and it appears rougher, more masculine, and not as fluent as the right painting, which reminded me of some loose gestures in Joan Mitchell’s painting. The viewer can see the struggle in the thick paint and textured surface. The contrasts in the two panels of value, fluidity and surface quality complement and balance each other.

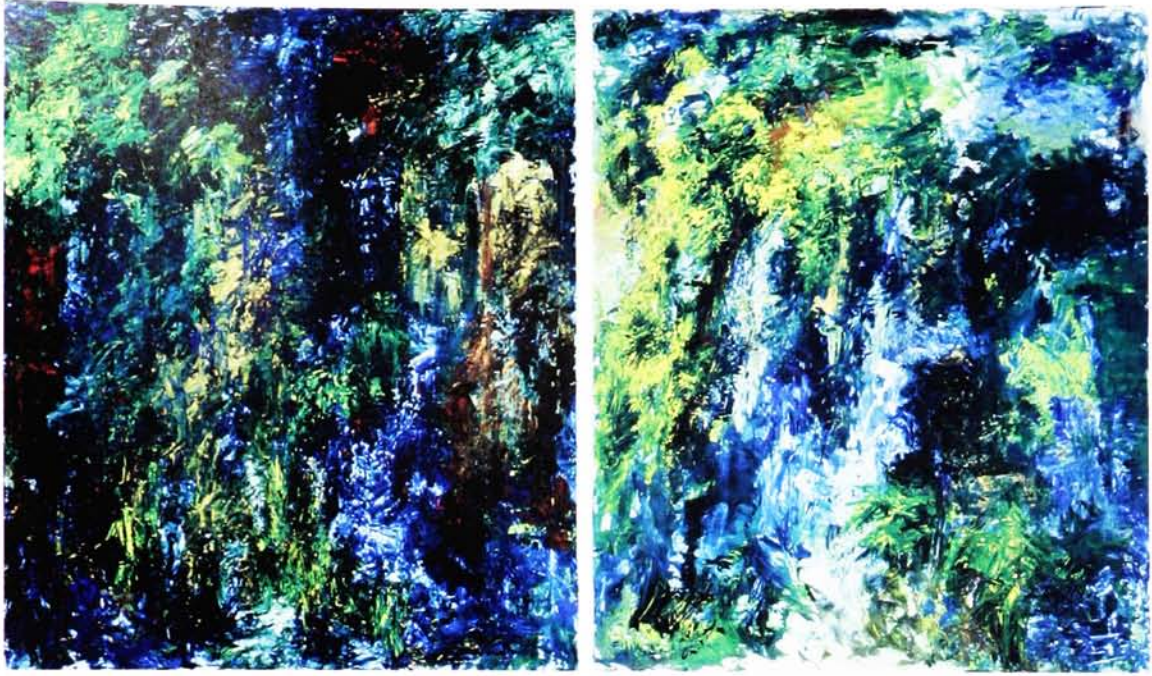


Fig. 10. *Two Waterfalls*, 2002. Acrylic on canvas, diptych 60 x 100 in.

However, in the painting, *Blue Waterfall* [fig. 11], I seem to go back to an approach similar to the one used in the *Dark Forest* Series. My inspiration is from both a tall wooden panel and a print. The tall format and the surface texture of the wood panel intrigued me, and I started to think what I should do with those qualities. Finally, I found a print that best fits my need. I did the print spontaneously without thinking about a particular image, but mostly considering its structure. The outcome of the print reminded me of a Chinese landscape scene or my home landscape scene. The reminiscences of home and the long format really inspired me to explore a different spatial relationship and a different compositional possibility. Because the long format is hard to deal with, especially if I try to pull the image out from nothing, I found the need for a general structure to follow. By referring to the general idea in the print image, I followed a similar process to that of the *Dark Forest* Series.



Fig. 11. *Blue Waterfall*, 2002.
Acrylic on wood, 95 x 30 in.

Reaching Out to the External World

In the following paintings, I used the same method as that of “*Two Waterfalls*”, trying to pull images out of nowhere. I found it more and more difficult to bring out the image. I strongly felt I needed to have a base to begin with, but not in the same way as I did for the *Dark Forest Series*. Instead of painting the picture in my mind and how I recognized the landscape from my memory, I needed to draw or paint from life and to feel the actual experience. I wanted to get connected to the actuality in life rather than being in my own world. Therefore, I went outside to paint the landscape and brought the sketch, *Yellow Forest* [fig. 12], back to the studio as a reference for a bigger painting. At this point, I was in a track closer to the traditional practices of western art. During the process of painting a big forest picture, in which I used *Yellow Forest* as a basis, I found myself losing interest in landscape. I did not feel the passion inside that drove me to express my emotion through its creation. Instead, the process became more of a routine, and I forced myself to keep moving. This painting is more representational, and I felt secure when I finished it. I found something solid to rely on. A kind of satisfaction came from the representation, which I cannot find in my earlier process. Meanwhile, I was not totally satisfied and felt something was lost, which might be the expressing of my emotion or the excitement from abstraction. I always have this kind of conflict and contradiction going on in the pursuit of abstraction and representation, of instinct and rationality. Hofmann found a great balance between the two psychological forces while creating a tension between the two. Not in the same way but in a similar vein, I kept trying to find a perfect balance that would fulfill my need for these two opposites.

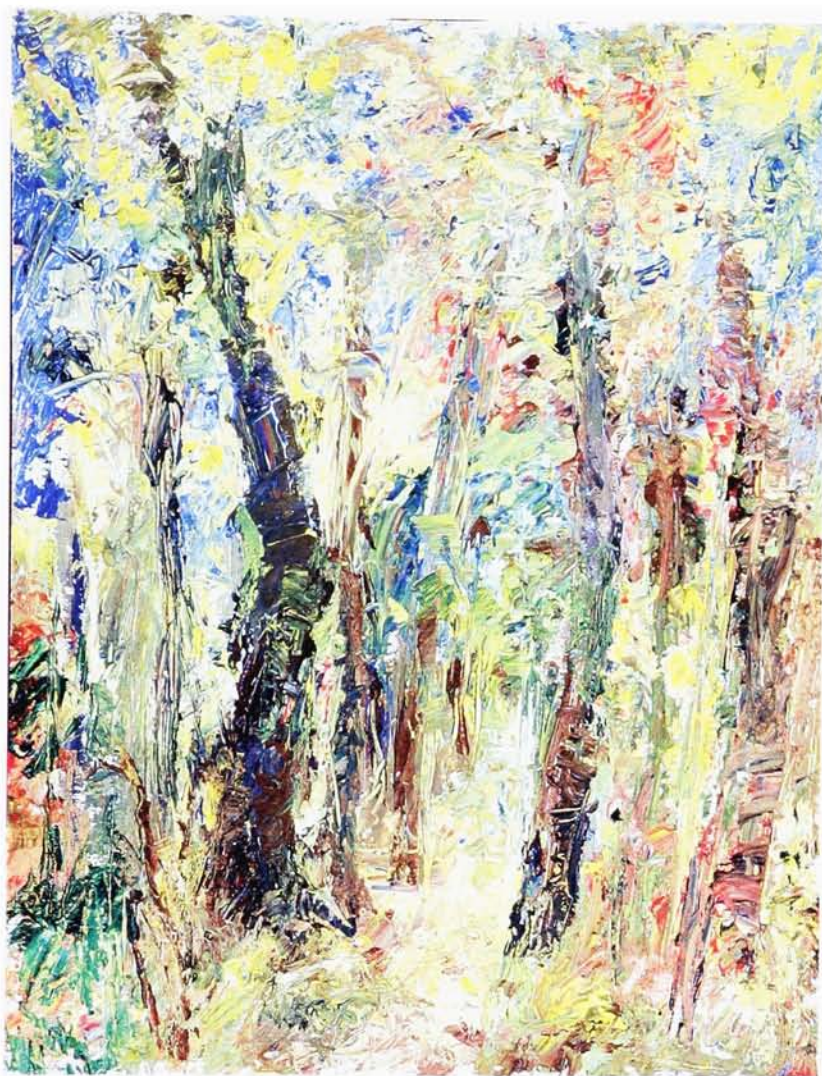


Fig. 12. *Yellow Forest*, 2002. Acrylic on paper, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 in.

In my earlier works like the *Dark Forest Series* or *Two Waterfalls* I combined both representation and abstraction, basically doing both simultaneously, even though the methods of the *Dark Forest* and *Two Waterfalls* are the opposite of each other. I need a more defined method to supplement what I lack in representation, especially in on-site experience, and also in the meantime to be able to explore what attracts me in abstraction. Therefore, I first tried to do an onsite representational painting. After that, I started another painting based on the same theme in the studio but did not look at the first painting. I added abstract elements in the second piece to make it half abstract and half

representational. As I moved forward to a third picture, I tried to completely free myself and make a total abstraction. By first doing the onsite painting, I obtained the actual experience with the object and a thorough observation of its appearance, which helped me gradually grasp its inner spirit, like the Sung artists did before they started a painting. However, I was not thinking of any particular method or artists from the past at that time. When I was painting the second piece, I inevitably had the impression of the experience and observation. With this solid base, the abstraction in the second piece better captured the feel of the objects and my personal interpretations. When it came to a complete abstraction in the third stage, it was totally about unfolding emotion and feelings from my inner world. However, it is different from starting with total abstraction as Jackson Pollock did. He viewed himself as nature. During the process, I went through different stages of preparation and training through interacting with the external world as well as with my internal world.

My first series of paintings applying this method was still landscape. As I had already been losing my interest in landscape, I did not want to limit myself and longed to explore different subject matters. Maybe just like De Kooning's impatience with staying in the same place and his idea of the need of painting to continually progress, I found a demand to move forward to a different stage.

So, I abandoned landscape and started trying various themes, like still life and portraits, using the same stages progressing from representation to abstraction. At the same time, I was also doing some stylistic experiments in order to challenge myself and find new possibilities. I felt refreshed and excited in the process of searching for new means of expression. However, since these were not resolved and my thesis exhibition was getting closer, I needed to focus and mature. I was confused and hesitated about which direction I should go since I did not really respond to any of the new experiments and subject matters, like the still life and portrait.

MY FIGURE PAINTING

The Beginning, Evolution and the Relationships with My Landscape and Abstract Expressionism

During this time of wandering, the figure drawing practices in a class I was taking attracted my attention. The forms of a female figure refreshed my eyes. I became fascinated by the spontaneous drawing of organic lines and also the charming and complex variations in the forms of a figure. Although I had practiced working with the human figure before, it had never appealed to me. After several live drawing practices, I began to try to do a painting based on a life drawing. I tried to use a brush instead of a knife, which I used mostly in my landscape paintings, because I was very attracted by the dynamic line quality of the figure and the free movement that the brush allowed. I tried to obliterate my earlier work and all the stylistic experiments from my mind and free myself to have a fresh start. I would still pursue a balance between representation and abstraction while I was painting. The outcome was not satisfying and did not speak to me at all. I think I did not really free myself. I was not true to myself, and I still wanted it to be the other way around. It took time and experience to adjust my thoughts to the new field and find my way around.

During this uncertainty, I started to study Willem DeKooning's works, and how he dealt with the spatial relationships between the figure and the background. The integration of the figure and its environment evoked what I already accomplished in my landscape. After another painting with similar self-denial or self-searching, I created the painting, *Woman with Shelf* [fig. 13], and let myself follow my intuition. I was just moving my arms and hands intuitively, mixing the paint in whatever way I felt like mixing it. I found myself returning to the stylistic expression of thick paint mixtures. However, it was an extension of my old style rather than the same old expression. Instead of using a sketch as a reference, I worked right from a model. The actual experience with the model gave the figure fresher colors and more lively expression. The flesh tones are closer to that of the figure and are more lively through the actual observation and interaction with the model. Because the human figure is alive, it is always changing. I had to paint comparatively fast to catch the moments during the pose. Therefore, the brushstrokes are pretty spontaneous

and full of movement. I just grabbed the paints, quickly mixed them without much thinking, and applied them right on the canvas. It is just like what I did with my landscape, but with even quicker movements accompanied by continual rational analysis while I was working. The figure is like my landscape, vague, dynamic, not descriptive, and maintains the feel of the object. However, the figure is more solid and more structural than the landscape. The thick paint gave the figure more weight than my previous figures. Because I paid most of my attention to the figure during the pose, I dealt with the spatial relationship afterwards. The space around the figure seemed incomplete and too sketchy compared to the completeness and massiveness of the figure. However, I did not feel like doing much more to the background because the action of painting for me had ended once the model was gone. The motivation for painting a figure is similar to a landscape. I need to feel the urge to proceed. The incomplete integration resulted in similar feelings I had experienced with the landscape. I then looked at some Franz Marc's paintings and learned how he integrated the object and its surroundings.



fig. 13. *Woman with Shelf*, 2003.
Acrylic on canvas, 52 x 32in

As I proceeded with the next painting, *Seated Woman* [fig. 14], I tried to observe both the figure and its relationship to the environment in order to maintain passion and better understand the spatial relationships. Compared to the landscape, I was dealing with a different spatial issue with the figure. The figure is inevitably viewed as a distinctive object. How I handled the relationship between figure and its surroundings became a challenge for me. In my landscape, I integrate everything as a whole. There is not one thing that stands out distinctively as an object. The viewer knows it is a landscape and feels the existence of rocks, water and trees. However, those objects are dissolved and mixed together to create an overall environment. They are all parts of the environment.



Fig. 14. *Seated Woman*, 2003.
Watercolor on paper.

Because the *Seated Woman* offers enough information about the figure and its relationship to space, and because I felt I had reached a point where the image gave me

some kind of satisfaction, I wanted to try another big painting by using the *Seated Woman* as a reference. I painted *Woman in Landscape* [fig. 15], to try to solve my issues with the figure. When painting from a live model, in some ways I tend to be more tight and this is reflected in my images. In the beginning, my brush was free, and I dealt with both positive and negative space. Then I found the need to go back to refer to a live model for details. I could not let the figure go free of reality. A live and solid reference is still an important concern in my process. This onsite focus makes it really different from my landscape pieces. The background is relatively loose. The space actually looks like a landscape instead of an interior as in the *Seated Woman*. The integration in *Woman in Landscape* satisfied me to some degree. The figure and ground dissolve into each other and extend each other. I paid some attention to the proportions and solidness of the figure rather than loosening and abstracting the forms like DeKooning did. My figure work is more defined but also expressive while my landscape is more about an impression. While I was proceeding with the figure theme, I found myself being pulled away more and more from abstract expressionism.

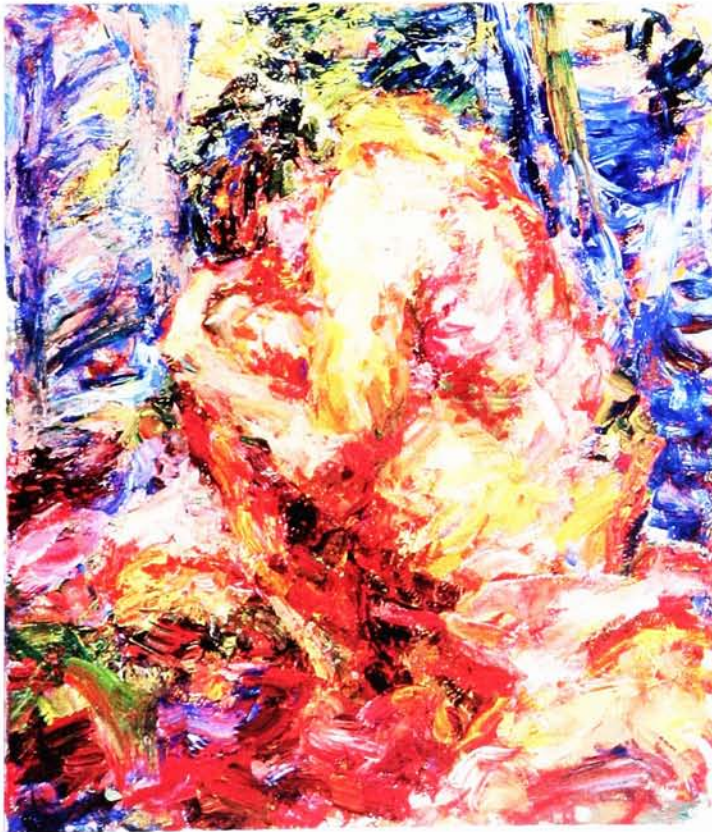


Fig. 15. *Woman in Landscape*, 2003.
Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 36in.

In almost every painting, including my figure painting, I am very concerned about the completeness of the piece. If I think a piece is not finished, and I can do some more to enhance it, I will not be satisfied or consider it a mature piece. However, in the “Woman” paintings of Willem de Kooning, the unfinished quality is what really makes the artwork outstanding. For deKooning, every piece is in process and is always being redefined. “...de Kooning used the act of painting to examine things around him, keeping all possibilities open and maintaining an atmosphere of uncertainty”(Fineberg, 2000, p. 74). Although we have a similar stylistic ambiguity in dealing with figure-ground relationships, our processes and concepts are different. De Kooning broke and reconstructed outlines and forms over and over to create distorted abstract figure and space. This process resulted in an ambiguous figure-ground relationship. Unlike de Kooning, I went back to redefine the figure in a more representational way. The process of redefining the figure combined both executing an image and expressing my feelings rather than just letting go of my emotions as with my landscape pieces.

When I started to get interested in figure forms, I also got involved in watercolor. Its characteristics of luminosity, softness and the potential of making very spontaneous gestures really intrigue me. Using watercolor with its different application processes from oil and acrylic began to have some impact on my figure painting. The transparency quality of color layering makes watercolor need more control and analysis of color than acrylics during the application of paint. Therefore, the way I applied watercolor became more deliberate instead of intuitive. This change of application process was carried to how I work with acrylic and other media. The way I applied and mixed paint was still fast, but I was more able to comprehend what I should do and what I was doing in each moment. My judgment became sharper and more effective. Reason came out more than my intuition. Abstract expressionism seems to be less important in my work.

When I began another figure painting, *Woman I* [fig. 16], I abandoned the figure-environment relationship. After I got involved with figurative art, I would try to solve the problem I encountered and stick with it even if I had already lost interest and knew that the painting did not achieve what I was after. I now decided to forget about my previous approaches. Maybe by chance or intuition or following my own voice, I made the figure itself the environment. I became attracted by how the light shined on the model’s face, and more importantly by a kind of a tranquility and deep mood reflected in her face. I planned

to include only a small portion of her nude body to make the picture and face more dynamic. Although I was trying to paint a face, I did not define the forms as I used to in the previous figure pieces. The forms dissolve and mix with each other in an impressionistic way. The torso is hard to recognize as a torso. It becomes a field of mixed colors. I felt free to make the figure into an entire composition as I did with the landscape. The eyes, nose and hair are just like rocks, trees and clouds in a landscape. In addition, I applied most of the paint by knife in *Woman I* as I had in my landscape paintings. My arms and hands were much freer when I used a knife. I moved the paint around freely and spontaneously and seemed to regain the freedom I felt when painting landscapes. If I did do brushwork, it was only a small proportion of the picture. I moved to a stage that is more related to my landscapes in terms of process and concepts. However, the painting was done through direct observation and has more structure, color vibration and reason. Reason was revealed naturally through the act of painting. I finished most of the painting almost without stopping, just as I did with landscape painting. With the exception of some minor adjustments on the torso, the picture was painted in one afternoon. It is fresh and full of passion. Moreover, instead of capturing the mood of the model that attracted me in the first place, the expression of the face expressed my mood.



Fig. 16. *Woman I*, 2003. Acrylic on canvas, 22 x 38in

From this satisfying experiment, *Woman I*, I realized that capturing the human spirit is what I valued the most, and it is best expressed through faces rather than the whole human form. Afterwards, I continued to pursue a similar idea, focusing on people's faces.

In the watercolors, *Head I* [fig. 17] and *Woman II* [fig. 18], I treated the head and surrounding torso as I had in *Woman I*. The consistent layering and movement of brushstrokes and the spatial ambiguity in *Head I* made it expressionistic, but realistic eyes made the picture more representational than any of my preceding works. I chose an elevated perspective for *Woman II* and looked down on the model as she lay below face down. I can always get an interesting illusion from this kind of perspective as the image advances and recedes into space. I never sketch before I paint, so I constantly construct and deconstruct the picture. Painting for me is just like waiting for something to happen whether I approach it representationally or abstractly. *Woman II* has similar characteristics as *Woman I*. The head, hair, arm and hand are recognizable but impressionistic. The rest of the torso is loose, more playful and experimental with the medium. I let the watercolor do whatever it naturally does, as I did in my acrylic works where the paint has its own reality. The loose treatment of the receding torso and the ambiguous figure-ground relationship moved me and felt most genuine. I revealed my emotion explicitly through the looseness and freedom of brushwork.

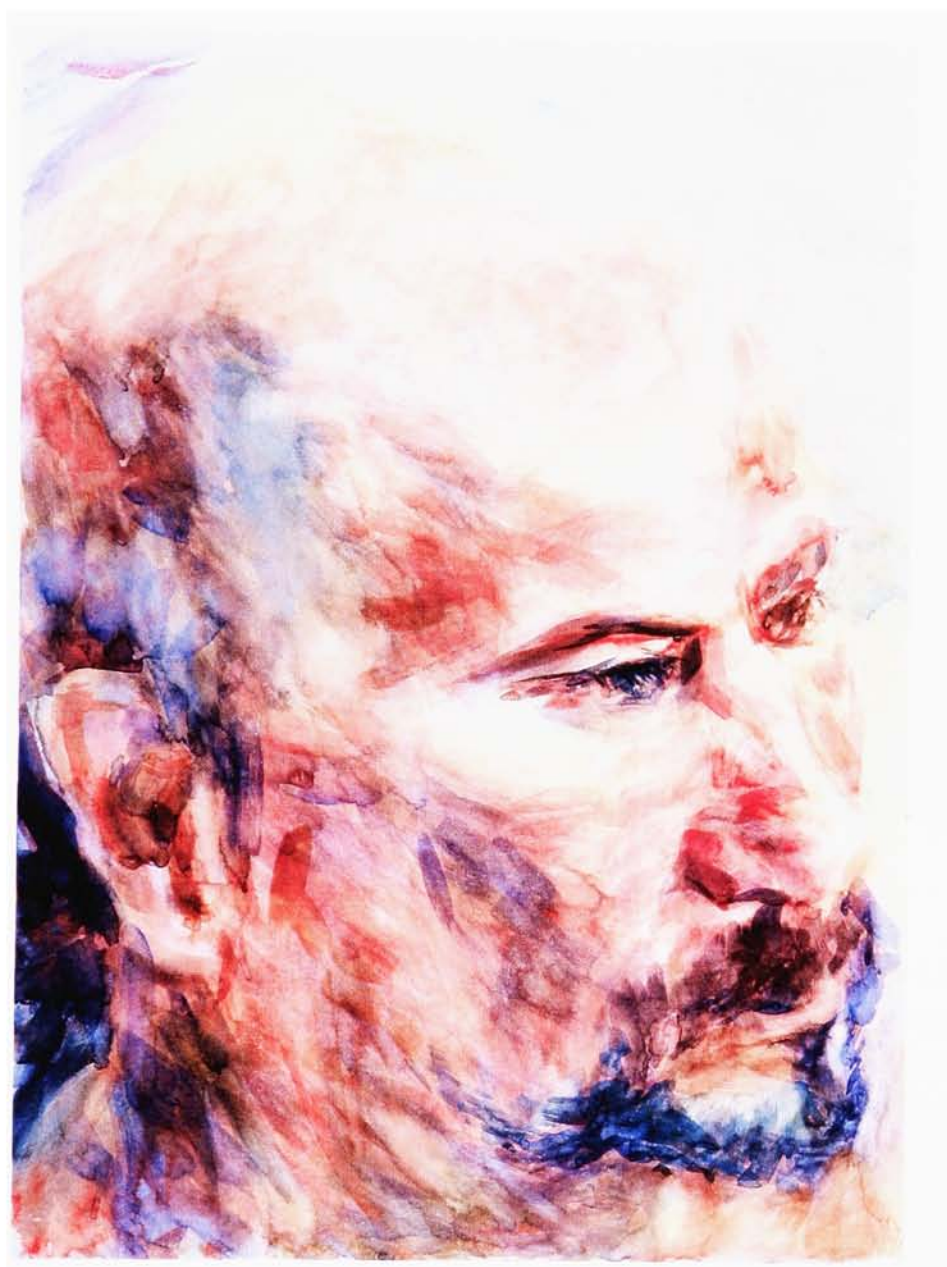


Fig. 17. *Head I*, 2003. Watercolor on paper, 28 x 20in.



Fig. 18. *Woman II*, 2003. Watercolor on paper, 20 x 28in.

This painting was not painted all at once from life like *Woman I* and *Head I*. I painted from a white female model at first, but it did not go smoothly. I struggled through the process but still did not get what I wanted. The same woman modeled for me twice. In the second attempt, I finally felt better about the head, at least. Afterwards, one of my Asian friends happened to be able to model for me, so I made her do the same pose and painted the hair and body from her, and also did some minor adjustment to the face. The face maintains a white woman's look, but the figure has more Asian feeling to it. These two models also have totally different body types. So basically I did not paint a figure from a figure. I put together what I thought would look good. I put various impressions together.

Techniques and Colors

In my acrylic paintings, like *Woman I*, I applied acrylic by brush in the first few layers. For the subsequent layers, I used a knife to manipulate thick paint in a similar way as in my landscape pieces. Because of the layers of thick paint, the surface has rough textures. Yellowish colors are the first layer. I would consider how greens and other colors show through skin, and I would also consider the depth of the colors. Therefore, I painted greenish colors as the second layer and over that applied warm lighter colors and some darker colors. Although I usually used thick paint not transparent or semi-transparent layering, some of the underlayer colors can be seen through the brushwork and knifework. The layering is not totally dry on dry. Since I painted quickly, the underlayer would partially and randomly mix with the upperlayer. I kept painting with the knife until I was satisfied, and until the figure no longer seems like it is there although it is still somewhat apparent.

In addition to how color was applied in each painting, the overall color temperature of my early landscape pieces to my figure pieces changed from cool to warm. This had a lot to do with subject matter. To some degree my paintings are related to reality whether from my memory, an impression, an experience, or from direct observation. Therefore, the Dark Forest series is in dark bluish colors, and *Two Waterfalls* and *Blue Waterfall* are in bluish colors. All my figure pieces are in warm colors. In my landscape works, I expressed how I felt when I thought of my experiences with the landscape. In my figure works, I expressed how I felt in my interaction with model.

Influence of Impressionism

From my early art training, what influenced me the most in Western art was impressionism. The impressionists observed directly from nature and recorded the perceptions of nature. I was always fascinated by Monet's magic play of light and colors, and how he captured the sensation of nature in each changing moment without describing its details but through the dissolution of static forms and the lack of fixed spatial limits. Instead of producing the likeness of reality, he subjectively transformed reality to express his vision. "In Monet's late work, the point of departure is no longer the motif or nature alone, but essentially the sensations felt by the artist in the face of the motif. This resulted in an increasing significance of color as an abstract quality, and an increasing autonomy of artistic means." (Sagner-Duchting, 2001, p. 21) By suggesting the sensation, personal interpretation of reality and the artist's empirical relationship to nature, impressionism is similar to the Chinese painting philosophy. The openness and unlimited space creates a different interaction between the work and the viewer. "In this relationship, which was to play a crucial role in modernism, the viewer relinquished his distance from the picture to virtually enter its "movements," and actively contributed to recreating, completing the image" (Sagner-Duchting, 2001, p. 25).

The lively and energetic flow of brushstrokes in Van Gogh's works always moves me. His emotions and passion unfolded through the thick paint and the little brushstrokes that break and compose the external world we see. Those energetic brushstrokes released how he felt deep in his soul. "He used the picture not to imitate appearances or humour the tastes of a cultivated society, but to re-create the world according to his own intelligence and sensibility" (Elgar, 1975). As I switched from landscape to figure, the external reference or direct observation took on a more and more important role in my work. Instead of expressing myself through my imagination, I expressed how I felt through the observation of the figure. Unlike the impressionists, I used color to express how I felt about the object more than record the actual color. How the impressionists influence me has less to do with stylistic appearance than with how the impressionists interpreted what we see and how they expressed themselves through this interpretation.

Comparison with Bay Area Figurative Artist

While my figure work was progressing, I also looked at some bay area figurative artists, like Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn and David Park. I found myself sharing similar experiences with them in returning to the external world. Before those artists worked figuratively, they were all involved in abstract expressionism. However, they found something missing in non-objective painting. David Park said in 1952:

I believe the best painting America has produced is in the current non-objective direction. However, I often miss the sting that I believe a more descriptive reference to some fixed subject can make. Quite often, even the very fine non-objective canvases seem to me to be so visually beautiful that I find them insufficiently troublesome, not personal enough (Jones, 1990, p. 1 and 2).

They did not draw figurative images from their inner thoughts. They drew from the outer world, from the model, and they had a subject to work on.

Their mature post-abstract figurative paintings preserved a sophisticated dialogue between abstraction and representation- the image oscillating between a recognizable subject and a boldly colored, abstract arrangement of thick slabs of paint (Jones, 1990, p. 1).

For me, reaching out to the world is what helped me examine my relationship to the world and my mental interaction with it. However, for Pollock and De Kooning, their figurative works seem to be an extension from their abstract expressionist work. They seem to evoke figurative images from the subconsciousness (Jones, 1990).

A New Direction

Between the creation of the two watercolors, *Head I* and *Woman II*, I created another acrylic painting, *Head II* [fig. 19]. I worked from the same model as *Head I* and used a similar composition. I found that I felt safer and freer doing abstraction, especially, after making a representational piece of the same subject. So after the more restrictive piece, *Head I*, I felt the need to free and abstract the forms and also free the surface as I liked to do in my early landscapes. I painted both from the model and also from the watercolor *Head I*. I struggled a lot more with abstracting reality than with abstracting my imagination. It is also because the human form is more structured and has more distinct characteristics. To abstract, but not totally lose the sense of human form and features is a much more difficult process for me than abstracting a landscape. This was the first time I painted a big portrait like this. The size of the image and the enlargement of the face and features forced me to be physically engaged in the painting and forced my arms to make gestures without being able to think about the details. I did not think it would be a good painting while I was in the process. I modified and pushed the paint over and over, but the image still looked so ugly and deformed. Not until I accepted what naturally happened did the image appear attractive. In addition to the size, the rapid movement of my arms and mind contributed to the abstract nature of the piece. A personal deadline created an urgency, which made me care less about details and proportions and caused my gestures to come out bolder.

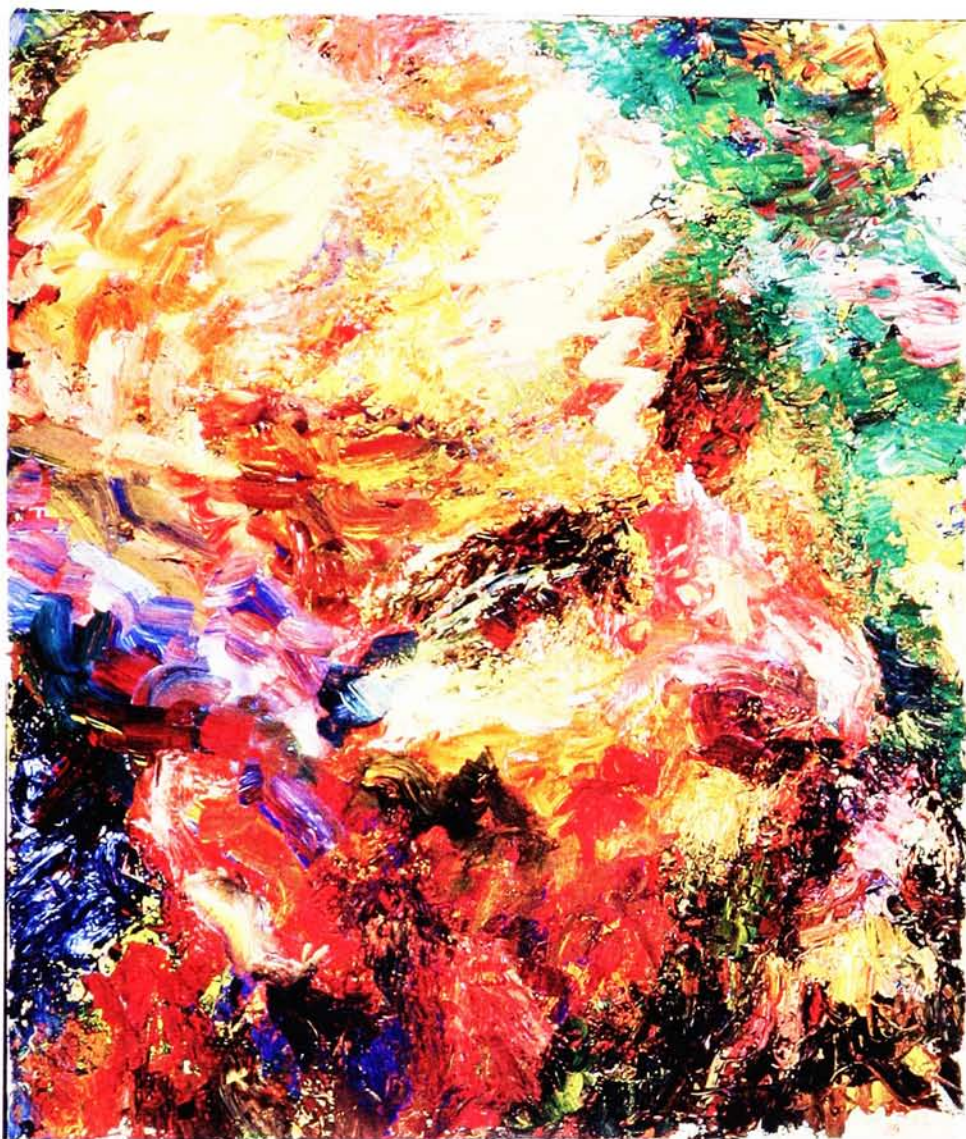


Fig. 19. *Head II*, 2003. Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 34in.

Not until I came back to the studio and tried to modify *Head II* using *Head I* as a reference did I settle down. I was able to observe and examine it more objectively and analytically. I did not experience much struggle during these modifications. The image started to be more pleasant to my eyes. However, I became frustrated when I realized I would not be able to change much. I quit modifying because of this frustration. The painting became a failure for me at that moment. Not until my friends and professors had a positive response to the painting did I start to re-examine what actually happened

differently and what was of value. Because of these other viewers' perspectives, I saw the potential that I ignored or tried to deny.

The face sits right between the two opposite corners of the canvas and occupies most of the picture. The abstraction of forms and colors are due to the spontaneous gestural paint application and makes the image ambiguous and hard to recognize. There is greater ambiguity between the face and the background. They mix and dissolve into each other much more than any of the figurative painting I did before, and the face and environment become one. It becomes an environment, a landscape instead of a portrait, there are no eyes, no nose, no cheek and no beard, they all become aspects of an overall environment. Only when stepping back and viewing the painting from a distance can one recognize it is a face. Unlike *Head I* and *Woman II*, which the viewer can recognize from some solid and more representational parts, *Head II* extends the representation to the overall environment. The spontaneous bolder gestures and colors and distortion contrast with *Woman I* which has more consistent brushwork, colors, layering, and correct proportion. By altering the proportion and making *Head II* much larger than life I found a new direction for my future work. I enjoy confusing the viewer by obscuring the image at first and then surprising them as they attempt to discover what is happening in the painting. It allows my painting to pose questions and engage the imagination. Hopefully it will answer these questions as well.

In my landscape and more mature figure works, I did not really think of any painter or any art movement while I was painting. I worked intuitively. My influences have become part of me and are revealed naturally in the work.

COMPARISON WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

“ I’m trying to be in a space between abstraction and figuration...The place I’m interested in is where the mind goes when it’s trying to make up for what isn’t there. When something is just suggested....” Cecily Brown, a contemporary British painter said. This ideal is always what I am after whether for my landscapes or my figure works. The woven and intertwined brushstrokes and distorted shapes and space in Brown’s work altered the fictive images beyond recognition. Animation Brown was involved in had some influences on the multigure composition, which resulted in a dynamic movement of the painting. Ambiguous and suggested images always fascinate me and make me wander in the picture trying to figure out what is in there. “She speaks of capturing ‘a sense of things becoming or of things that exist dissolving’” (Zilczer, 2002). Transformation of explicit imagery into an expressive and suggestive one is also what I have been doing and trying to achieve in my painting. However, what her work transformed into was not just distortion and dissolution of the original image. She transformed it into vibrant pictorial fictions.

In addition, I found some of the characteristics of my process resonate with hers. For example, her paintings often ended up different than her original expectation. “Rather, each painting becomes a record of the struggle between her original idea and the demands of the painting as it evolves through constant reworking” (Zilczer, 2002). With her physical involvement, she also expects the viewer to become visually involved in the experience of painting. Although her figure work is also in a zone between abstraction and representation, she has a different motivation than I. Brown’s struggle is to capture the power of sexuality, which is shown through the flesh-tone colors in many of her paintings including her landscape pieces, like *Hoodlum* [fig. 20], *Bacchanal*, *Tender is the Night* and *Lady Luck*. Her painting always passes on the message about carnal revel. What drives me to paint the figure is the spirit of humanity. In contrast to Brown’s multigure motions composed and spread over the canvas, I made the figure a whole environment and created movement within the figure itself in works like *Woman I* and *Head II*.



Fig. 20. Cecily Brown. *Hoodlum*, 2000-01. Oil on linen, 75 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 90 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Joseph H. Hirshhorn
Purchase Fund, 2001.

Another contemporary artist I found myself especially drawn to is the German artist, Anselm Kiefer. In some of his paintings, for example the field and field path series, he layered the thick paint over and over and built up a tremendous amount of material while also creating an extreme illusionist depth. These two contrasting elements coexist in the painting. The high horizon line and the implication of furrows that are drawn into the space create an extreme depth. It draws the viewer's eyes from bottom to top. It makes the viewer feel as if he/she were standing in the foreground and leaning forward into space. His works engulf the audience not only by these spatial relationships but also the active, tactile surface. The gestural expression through the heavily built-up surface turns the field, the area below the horizon, into a non-objective picture. However the more representational images on the horizon, where the paint gets thinned out, suggest a field. While the audience travels from bottom to top or from top to bottom, the sensation is one of shifting from abstraction to representation and vice versa. The constant changing of focus creates a state of ambiguity and uncertainty. These works are in the zone where abstraction and representation compete but also harmonize with each other. The paths in the field and the deep space of illusion drive the viewer to travel back and forth, creating

motion. On the other hand, the flat and material looking surface stops the movement in the picture. The reason why his paintings, with their built-up surface, really speak to me is that we share similar sensations in terms of landscape painting, especially in relation to my *Dark Forest* series. My landscapes have a highly textured and thickly painted surface while representational objects and the illusion of depth also pull the viewer into the place. The darkness of Kiefer's painting conveys an oppressive and sometimes scary atmosphere. A similar oppressive feeling is also shown through the darkness and close environment in my *Dark Forest* series. Compared to his transformation from thick to thin, most of my landscapes have an evenly thick texture. In addition, my landscapes are purely a recreation of an environment while his landscape has some symbolic elements, which sometimes stand out and draw the viewer's attention. Sometimes they are integrated into the environment. In his *Cockchafer Fly*, he wrote the lines of a German children's song from post World War II across the horizon, where the objective and non-objective meet. "It is a simple addition that allows Kiefer to transform a Van Gogh-like agitated landscape into a mournful history painting suggesting German loss, partition, and the collapse of religious 'faith'" (Biro, 1998, p. 52).

In some of his painting, like *Hortus Philosophorum* and *Zweistromland*, he started to embed some real material, like earth, straw, hair and lead, into the painting. Kiefer regarded the transformation of material into the creation of a picture as an alchemical process, in which the transformation of material is accelerated. He said, "I simply accelerate the transformation which is already inherent in things" (Arasse, 2001, p. 237). The transformation from the visible and tactile to the invisible and spiritual makes the reality unreal and the unreal real.

FUTURE DIRECTION

Struggling between abstraction and representation, instinct and reason, I found a satisfying balance in *Woman I*, *Woman II* and *Head II*. I will keep exploring what happened in these works. *Head II*'s abstraction and spontaneous gesture, which are distinct from the other two pieces excites me, and I would like to distort the figure more. I would like to examine and experiment with forms and the relationships between them while still maintaining the essence of the figure. Meanwhile, I will still keep exploring the possibilities of representational and impressionist elements as I did in *Woman I* and *Woman II*. I, also, want to open up subject matter again instead of only concentrating on the figure. I think I will go back to nature for inspiration.

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